

SARS exposes China's flaws

By MINEO NAKAJIMA

Until recently, pundits here and abroad portrayed China in rosy terms. The 21st century, they said, is "the Chinese century," China is "the world's factory," and so on. Now, however, China is described in negative terms following Beijing's poor handling of the SARS epidemic this spring, which originated in Guangdong Province late last year.



Chinese authorities made a series of mistakes: They reacted clumsily in the early stages of the outbreak; they concealed information about the deadly virus; and after the coverups unraveled, they took halfway measures.

The SARS debacle has given the world an insight into the real nature of Chinese society. Now the international community is casting a wary eye on China, with some people calling it "a problem of the 21st century" or "a sickbed of the world."

China's new president, Hu Jintao, made his first international debut at the June 2-3 Group of Eight summit of industrialized nations in Evian, France. The meeting presented him with an important chance to apologize not only to China's neighbors but also to the world for the enormous damage and anxiety caused by SARS. Unfortunately, he never took advantage of this opportunity.

Moreover, Chinese authorities did not allow Taiwan, which had been hit hard by the disease, to attend World Health Organization meetings as an observer. Beijing continues to put political interests above humanitarian concerns.

The SARS imbroglio has revealed three major problems about China:

- Chinese society is opaque. The primary reason for this is that China has the trappings of a military state controlled by a

communist party dictatorship.

On April 20, two Chinese officials held responsible for the SARS disaster — Health Minister Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong — were dismissed. Only then did Chinese authorities begin to disclose information on SARS cases.

In early February, media in Hong Kong warned against the disease. The Wall Street Journal, in a subsequent editorial titled "Quarantine China," sharply criticized Chinese authorities and called for the "isolation" of China. But Beijing would not listen. The People's Daily dismissed the warnings as "demagoguery" and part of "malicious campaigns" against China. In the meantime, SARS spread not only in continental China but to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore as well. It also affected Chinese communities in Vietnam and Canada.

- The second problem is that Chinese statistics and other data are not always credible. For example, Chinese officials, including Zhang, issued statements and figures saying the epidemic had been "brought under complete control." But those reports proved false. China published false information even about life-and-death medical issues such as SARS.

Some experts had already raised questions about the credibility of China's economic indicators as well. Among them is University of Pittsburgh professor Thomas G. Rawski, who published an article on China's gross domestic product statistics titled "What's happening to China's GDP Statistics" in the Sept 12, 2001, issue of China Economic Review.

According to that analysis, from 1998 to 2001, China's GDP expanded 7.7 percent annually for a four-year cumulative growth rate of 34.5 percent. Yet, in the same period, energy use dropped 5.5 percent and the consumer price index declined 2.3 percent. Urban formal employment increased by only 0.8 percent.

The article says provincial officials

competing to increase production tend to present false or embellished reports. In fact, this is a tendency that remains basically unchanged from the late 1950s, when China pursued the "Great Leap Forward" policy.

The SARS outbreak has also exposed some of the same old aspects of Chinese society. Changing those deep-seated tendencies will require a Herculean effort by the new Chinese government under Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao, which is fighting a "war without gunpowder" against political foes.

It appears Beijing's effort at public disclosure of information is meeting stiff resistance from within the Chinese Communist Party. Access to the Internet remains restricted. During the politically charged SARS crisis, many Beijing officials still affiliated with former President Jiang Zemin and his right-hand man Zeng Qinghong fled to Shanghai.

- The third problem is that confidence in Chinese authorities, both at home and abroad, has been seriously undermined. As a result, the international image of China has been badly tarnished.

Foreign investors lured to China under its policy of "reform and openness" will likely hold off on new spending. Some of them may even pull out of the country. It is also likely that the Chinese public will become more dissatisfied with a governance system that has failed to disclose such vital information as that related to SARS infections.

Indeed, the spread of SARS seems to reflect on the failings of a communist party dictatorship that has consistently suppressed human rights and democracy in China. It is not difficult to foresee the fate of such a regime.

Mineo Nakajima, former president of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, is an internationally published social scientist. This article was translated from the Sankei Shimbun's Seiron column of June 17.